

Chapter 29

Katherine hurt.

Whatever she'd done last night hadn't been a good idea. She reached over to ask Tom what it was they'd been up to, but her hand found nothing there, not even his side of the bed. The emptiness under her hand hit her heart like a dagger and she sat up with a gasp.

"Careful there, ma'am. You have a mild concussion."

She barely heard the man as she tried to breathe through the tightness in her chest. She could feel her eyes getting wet and cursed herself. She was past crying over this. She was out for revenge now.

Her breathing finally returned, and she took a deep breath. The man moved to touch her, but she batted his hand away. He was young, in a blood-red bodysuit under a pale-green lab coat that matched the walls. The bed was utilitarian and the screen on the wall gave readouts of her condition.

She was in a hospital.

"How long?"

"You need to lie back down, ma'am. It could be days before you're ready to leave."

She shoved him away and threw her legs over the side of the bed. "How long have I been unconscious?"

The man consulted his datapad. "You were brought in twelve hours ago."

The string of curses she let out made the man stare.

What had hit her? What did she remember? The fighting, overwhelming Tristan. There she'd gotten a call. Vernon telling her a group of mercs was heading her way. She'd been angry at the thought someone was going to try to poach Tristan from her. She'd taken Armiln and Carlie and prepared to welcome them, trusting her people to subdue Tristan.

Instead of them entering, there had been a canister. A flash of light, a deafening screeching, a concussive blast. That hadn't knocked her out. It had almost blinded and deafened her, but she'd forced herself to stand. She'd made out gray armor. A man had pressed something against her chest. That was what had rendered her unconscious.

"Ma'am, you hit your head pretty hard. Not to mention all the bruises."

"There're from the blast," she said offhand. She'd flown back, hit the ground hard. Gray armor, more than one, cohesive unit. It couldn't be military; they unilaterally preferred black. So Vernon was right—mercs. She didn't know of any large groups of mercs.

"Did you give me any Heals?"

"Ma'am, Heal Alls are only to keep someone in one piece long enough so they can reach a hospital; they aren't a replacement for proper care."

"I'm going to take that as a no. Get me two; I have work to do."

“Ma’am—”

“Kid, I don’t have time for this shit. I’ve already lost twelve hours, not to mention my men who died. I’m getting out of here. You want to be responsible for me collapsing once I’m out of this room, that’s fine by me.” She looked at the flimsy pale-green gown she had on. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. Where’s my armor?” She pulled it off.

The man pointed at the closet.

“Why are you still here? Get me those Heals.” It might have been her tone, or the fact she was naked, but he rushed out of the room. Before the door closed, a man entered. She looked at him—the civilian attire, the body language, and growled. “I’ve got nothing to say.” She got off the bed and held on to it as the nausea passed.

“Miss Silt, you were found at the site of a battle with multiple casualties,” the detective said. “I have questions.”

She tried to scream at him not to call her that, but her chest was too tight. She missed Tom so fucking much. She shouldn’t have used that name, but she’d needed the authority it gave. Of course the local Law would want to talk to her.

She faced the man and made her nudity obvious. He was thin, long light-brown hair falling behind him in a braid. His almost golden eyes didn’t leave her face. Why couldn’t the men here have been raised to be uncomfortable around a naked woman like back home? It was such a practical distraction.

“Fine. Ask.” She headed for the closet with measured steps to keep the pounding in her head down.

“What were you doing there?”

“Hunting a criminal.”

“A Martin Asinsky, correct?”

“Yes.” She put a hand next to the door and caught her breath.

“Maybe you should come back to bed, Miss—”

“Fuck you.” She cursed her lack of control, but she didn’t want to hear that name again. “I’m sorry. I’m told I hit my head.”

“Which is why you should get back into bed. I’m sure the doctors are going to want to examine you.”

“Good for them. I don’t have the time. Ask your questions because once I’m dressed, I’m leaving.”

The man sighed, but when he spoke his tone was professional. “It’s my understanding Mister Asinsky is a blackmailer, and yet you were at a drug lab. Care to explain why?”

She opened the door, and smells of dust and soot wafted out. Really? This was a hospital, and they didn’t even have a cleaner in the closet? What about preventing infection and that stuff?

“Miss?”

“I heard you.” She found the under-layer. “My information said that’s where he was heading. Maybe he had something on them and he was going to force them to help him.”

“And the Silver Hand?”

She almost said they’d just showed up, but caught herself. She wasn’t local, so she wouldn’t know who they were. She looked the under-layer over. It was intact.

“Miss?”

“I don’t know who that is,” she snapped. She put it on.

“They’re a local cartel, with planetary reach. What were they doing there?”

“How should I know?”

“What about the dead mercenaries?”

She paused and bile rose. “How many?”

“Seven.”

The bastard had killed more than half the people she’d brought. How the fuck did one alien fight up almost a dozen trained mercs, and however many of Flint’s people had been there?

“Why were there mercenaries there?” the detective asked, an edge to his voice.

She used the act of dressing to help calm herself. “They were my backup.”

“Against an extortionist?” There was clear disbelief in the tone.

“Yes, an extortionist.” Anger was slipping through. She faced the detective. “Heading to a drug dealer with, I had no idea what kind of forces. Tell me again how many of them are dead? Seven? You seem to be under the false impression that just because Asinsky likes to sweet-talk old ladies into giving them every credit they have, that he isn’t willing to use whatever force at his disposal to avoid capture. There’s a reason they sent me to get him instead of telling you about it. I lost seven of my highly trained people. How many officers would

you have lost?"

"None. We wouldn't have barged into an unknown situation. We have procedures for taking in criminals with superior forces."

"And while you're busy coordinating everything, Asinsky vanishes. You think I barged in because I don't know what I'm doing? Unlike you, I know exactly what I'm up against. Where is that kid with the Heals?" She put her pants on.

The man tapped a finger on the edge of his datapad. "Alright, you don't know why the Silver Hand was there. I'm going to say it was bad timing on your part." His tone made it clear he didn't believe that. "And leave it at that. Maybe you just happened to step into a takeover, or maybe Asinsky pissed them off and they were after him too."

"That's more likely." It did sound more plausible than anything she could come up with currently. "He has enough on enough people to think he can get away with anything."

"So maybe you can tell me who the third party is?"

"I don't know." She wished she did know who they were, that way she could go after them to make them pay for losing Tristan. Wait, was he dead? She almost asked if the body of a dead Samalian had been found. That would have blown her story all to vacuum. And she didn't have to. She knew the answer. No, Tristan wasn't dead. He'd escaped in the confusion, like he always did.

"Witness said they came in and left with someone."

She spun and grabbed on to the wall to avoid falling. "Who?" Had they actually caught him?

The detective consulted his datapad. "I don't have that information. Either the witness didn't know, or that wasn't done processing when I left the precinct."

"Then access your damned system and get me the info."

"I can't do that. We have a strict 'no open connection' rule here."

"You what? That's stupid, how do you get updated on what's happening when you're in the field?"

"If it's vital, we have an unconnected comm. Someone will call me, I can't call in."

She just stared. "Why would you do something that stupid?"

"Do you know how many attacks your average Law office gets in one day? With the size of the universe, can you count the number of criminals who want their data removed? No, you don't, because it happens so often no one bothers keeping track anymore. Well, we decided to do something about it. Since this system has been in place, there has been zero successful coercions against us."

"Isn't that a little extreme?"

The man shrugged. "Maybe, but it worked. So who cares if it causes inconveniences?"

She sighed and grabbed her shirt. She cared. She shook it and a cloud of soot flew at the detective. "So, what I want is at your precinct?" She put it on while the man coughed.

"Yes."

She checked the closet. Of course her gun wasn't there. Another reason to go to the precinct. "Then you're going to fly me there."

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Her head was clear by the time the hover landed. The Heals she'd taken off the cart, and her pilot's refusal to go in pursuit mode to get here faster, had fixed her up.

"Where are my people?"

"As per procedures, mercs operating without authorization are treated and incarcerated."

"I need them released."

"Miss—"

"They are operating under my order. I'm their authorization. Do you need me to read you the Jobulan Corporate Act?"

"No." The man sighed. "Any corporate agent has the authority to hire supplementary forces to aid in their duties."

"Good, I'm glad to hear they still teach it at the academy."

He glared at her.

She didn't care. "Make it happen."

"I can't. Only the captain can order a release without orders from the judicial systems."

She opened the door and smiled at him. "Then you go and tell him to make it happen."

She stepped out and headed inside the precinct. When a young officer tried to keep her from entering the inner sanctum, she chewed him out so thoroughly he was a puddle of fear, and then she showed him her

ID. No one got in her way after that.

She looked the room over. Forty desks or so, most occupied by an officer or a detective busy filling whatever form they had to. One stopped what he was doing as her gaze fell on him. Broad shoulders, short brown hair, and a cocky smile that made her hate him on sight. The fact that her mangled face didn't seem to bother him didn't help his case.

She went to his desk.

"Hello there, pretty lady. What can I—"

"Get me everything you have on the group of mercs that left the building where the attack took place. I'm told someone was carried off. I need to know who."

He beamed. "I'll be happy to do that, but I think—"

She leaned in and got in his face. "No, you don't think. You do what I tell you. You probably think you're some impressive thing. You probably think all you have to do is wave it around and all the women will fall on it for your pleasure. But let me tell you, you're nothing. You have nothing that's going to impress anyone, certainly not me. So pack it back in, keep your mouth shut, and do what you're told, because if you don't, I'm going to crush you."

"Miss Silt." The voice came from behind her and carried authority.

She grabbed on the edge of the desk not to stagger forward as her chest tightened. She didn't close her eyes, she didn't allow herself to show any of the pain she felt. The man she ended up staring at slowly pushed himself away from her.

She took her time straightening. Let him think she was playing power games. When she turned, she could breathe enough to greet him. "Captain Sinor."

The man was another young one—all slick and trying to look more impressive than he actually was. Even the suit was a statement, being almost corporate in its cut. But the details he got wrong made him come across as insignificant to her.

"Just because you're corporate doesn't give you the right to harass my officers. The procedures are clear. If you need something, you come talk to me."

She could do anything she damned well wanted, she wanted to tell him. But pissing off a leader never led to an easy solution, so she buried her anger and played the game this little wannabe corporate wanted.

"My apologies. I didn't see you and he looked to be in charge in your absence." She smiled. It didn't mean she had to play nice.

The man barely hid the snarl. "Come to my office."

She followed him and once there, with the door closed, he rounded on her.

"What the fuck is this I hear about you blowing up a building?"

"That wasn't me."

"Don't fucking play semantics with me. It was one of your mercs, so it was you. What are you even doing hiring those?"

"I have the—"

"I don't give a fuck about your authority. When you contacted me, you said you were after a blackmailer, one man. You never mentioned needing your own little army to do that. Do you have any idea how many dead we have? Eighty-six. That's how many people your little hunt killed."

Since they were done playing the game, she got in his face. "Let me remind you, Captain, that I don't have to tell you fuck all." Unlike the other one, the sight of her face this close made him lean back. "I let you know I was here as a courtesy. I can show up, level this city, and so long as my boss doesn't complain about it, there's not one fucking thing you can do about it. So go sit your fucking ass down and get me the information I need."

The man's face was red, and she knew someone would pay for his humiliation. But it wouldn't be her, and that was all she cared about. He sat at his desk.

"I want everything on the group who left the building. One of your officers told me they had someone with them."

He kept glaring at her, but he typed. The wall behind him changed from boring gray to the scene of a street. A distortion was moving along it until it turned into an alley.

"That's all the recorders got," he growled. "The information lab is working on the image, trying to get something out of it, but whatever that is, it isn't code-related. It's something they're wearing, so they have no idea how to go about reconstructing the images."

"After the explosions, people didn't go near windows, but so far a handful of people have come forward

to report that there were between six to twenty people leaving and that they were carrying people.”

“People? As in more than one? Your officer said they’d left with one person.”

“That’s what the first witness said, but we’ve since gotten more witness reports. There was some sort of altercation just outside the building, and they grabbed those people too.”

“Any details?”

“Only that one of them wasn’t human.”

Not reacting took everything she had. It was impossible. There was no way someone else had beaten her to him. She’d worked too damned hard. She wasn’t going to let someone else have the pleasure of making him pay.

“Where did they go?”

“We tracked their movement to a cargo hover, and that to the port. From there they took a shuttle to a ship.”

“Which one?”

“No idea.”

“Excuse me? You have a ship parked in orbit and you don’t bother finding out who it is?”

The man rolled his eyes. “They weren’t anywhere near this planet. They were stationary around number eight; it’s nothing but a hunk of rock. Nothing there for centuries, so what do I care who stops there to take in the view? Unlike you corporates, we have something called privacy here, and we respect it.” His smug expression made her want to rip his head off, but as satisfying as that would be, it would cause her nothing but trouble. If they ever found out she didn’t have corporate backing, her hunt would become exponentially more difficult.

She calmed herself. She’d find another way of getting the information she needed. “My people, have they been released?”

“They’re being processed.”

“Where are they?”

“Still in their cells.”

She left his office, attracting stares as she walked through the room to the door marked “detention”.

“Open it,” she told the woman seated the closest to it.

She obeyed, and Katherine had to go through a scanner, then another set of doors, this one reinforced, before she entered a hall with small rooms on each side.

They were old-styled, having bars instead of forcefields. Only the last one had the glow over it. Curious, she headed for it, nodding to her people as she passed their cell and letting them know they were going to be released.

“I wouldn’t get close to that one,” an officer said. “That alien’s crazy. Sent seven of ours to the hospital.”

She rounded on him. “And what did you do to cause him to do that?”

“Hey!” He backed up, hands raised. “We didn’t do anything. We had to bring him in, but he didn’t want to come. He kept holding on to that other one.”

“No...” she whispered as she got cold. Where had Armiln been? She’d lost track of him after the flash bang. She hurried to the cell, and while what she saw wasn’t what she’d expected, it didn’t make her feel any better. Armiln was seated on the floor, holding Jurrans’ body. What was left of it. Half the bony plates on his chest and arm had been ripped off. An arm was missing, and his head was twisted around.

She dropped to her knees. “I am so sorry,” she whispered.

Armiln looked up, misery and rage mixed into those odd eyes of his. “I didn’t know it would happen. I should have known. I should have told Jurrans to be careful.” He pulled the Frenian’s body against him. “I’m so sorry I let this happen. But I’ll avenge you, I promise.” He looked back up, and Katherine shuddered at the pain in Armiln’s face. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll find him, I promise.”

The Porfedian nodded. “He’s mine, Katherine. I’m sorry for the suffering he caused you, but if you get in my way, if you try to keep me from killing that Samalian...”

“I won’t. I just want him to suffer and to die. If you’re the one doing it, it’s fine.”

“Oh, he will suffer.” Armiln lost whatever humanity he usually had. “Tristan is going to wish he’d been killed the first time someone tried it, because the universe knows I will make him feel every pain imaginable.”

